UNTIL THE KINGDOM COMES

October 5, 1986, World Communion
11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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"...a plan...to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth." --Ephesians 1:10 (RSV)

Scripture
Ephesians 1:3-10

In the Broadway show, The Search for Intelligent Life in the Universe, one of Lily Tomlin's wonderful characters is Trudy, a street person whose transition from creative consultant for an ad agency to bag lady has included bizarre but often remarkably wise insights into the human condition. In one sequence Trudy is pondering the enigma of what Paul Tillich used to call "being itself"--the meaning of life--the mystery of life: "meaning-mystery: mystery-meaning." "What," she asks the audience, "if there is no meaning? That would be the real mystery of life, wouldn't it?"

Trudy's life is given both mystery and meaning by her relationship with her "space chums," extraterrestrial creatures with whom she has been speaking ever since her mental blow-up. People laugh at the line - but it is nervous laughter because the question of the meaning of life, the purpose of human life is, of course, the abiding human question: What's it all about? What does it mean?

It is the question scholars ponder and great literature addresses: "Life--it is a tale told by an idiot,...full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." "Human life is like the grass which is renewed in the morning and fades and withers by evening." Socrates, the Psalmist, Shakespeare, Charlie Brown's friend Lucy--all have something to say on the subject.

The Christian approach to the ultimate purpose and destiny of life is called eschatology. It is not a precise discipline. In fact, there is a sense in which the more precise our eschatology becomes, the less useful it is. Of course there have always been those who have seemed to know exactly where we are going and when we are going to get there. The Bible, however, is less precise. The purpose and direction of history is set forth in a variety of images but there is one common motif in all of them and it is harmony, peace, reconciliation. Faith suggests that what God has in mind, God's plan as it were, is getting back together that which is separated, healing that which is broken, reconciling that which is alienated.

The preface to the Letter to the Ephesians which we heard this morning is a doxology to the God of creation whose purpose it is to bring things back together. Paul uses big words and big ideas to evoke our praise for God. From all eternity God has planned to love us and reconcile us and bring us together. It is no afterthought. Reconciliation is not something

behaviorally is a matter of intense discussion and debate and a wide variety of conclusions. But on World Communion Sunday, as we sit and ponder the words of Scripture about God's plan to bring together into harmony the broken parts of creation, we discover that doing nothing, saying nothing, thinking nothing is not an alternative.

God's plan is to reunite that which is divided. God's will for us is that we live in harmony, that we live as if the barriers that divide us from one another were already down. It is global - and that means political and economic but it is also very personal. We are created, we believe, not for isolation, but for relationship. Alienation, separateness is not our natural state. We are individuals when we are together.

I discovered a new hero this summer. His name is Dodge Morgan. He boarded a 60-foot sailboat last year and fulfilled a life-time goal by sailing around the world alone. His adventure covered 25,671 miles and took 150 days. I was fascinated by his answer when a reporter asked what he had learned: What he learned was, first, that solo navigation wasn't all that much fun. And second, "All we have," he said, "is the few people we have direct contact with--family, friends, whoever... As beautiful as solitude can be, as close to the truth as you can come in the soul's presence at sea, I've made up my mind that the race I really want to belong to is the human race." [People Magazine, Summer, 1986, p. 40]

We were made for each other, apparently. The deepest insights into our humanity suggest that we are most human when we are in relationship.

Joseph Sittler, Emeritus Professor of Theology at the University of Chicago, has published a wonderful new book of reflections and essays in which he concludes, after eight decades of life, "a solitary person doesn't have a chance of becoming a person.....The meaning of the Adam and Eve story, in particular the introduction of Eve, is not simply to say that it takes two to tango. The Eve story communicates to all of us the meaning of the German proverb: 'Ein Mensch ist kein Mensch': a solitary person is no person: personhood is relation and presupposes another for its actualization." [Gravity and Grace, p. 47]

That's not a psychologist or an enabler of personal growth and sensitivity groups. That's a very distinguished and scholarly theologian speaking on the basis of scriptural tradition--we have been created for relationship, to be together. We need each other--in order to be... The impetus, the internal energy for reconciliation and healing and unity is already in each of us.

On the night of his arrest and betrayal Jesus took bread and wine, and using words and gestures we have never been able to forget, he broke it and poured it out, and they ate and drank together and among the unforgettable words he said were "I shall not drink of the fruit of the wine until the Kingdom of God comes..."

The in-between times, before God's Kingdom comes in its fullness, are characterized by brokenness and division--but also by signs, by hints, glimpses, of healing and reconciliation. The time before the Kingdom comes is characterized by alienation but also occasions of coming together,

God thought of after he noticed how terribly broken human life can be. From all eternity, Paul suggests, God had this in mind. In Christ, God brings together the separated pieces of creation. It's a big theology; it stretches our minds a bit. Markus Barth called the Christ of this passage a "Cosmic Christ." He wrote:

> "Jesus Christ has to do with wherever divisions exist between races and nations, between outsiders and insiders.... Christ has broken down every division."

There is a behavioral imperative in that cosmic theology. To believe it is true is to be under mandate to act as if it were true. Barth wrote:

> "To confess Jesus Christ is to affirm the abolition and end of division and hostility, the end of separation and segregation, the end of enmity and contempt, the end of every sort of ghetto." [The Broken Wall, Markus Barth, p. 43]

I was in residence last week at Union Theological Seminary in New York--and all week long the most remarkable dynamic kept happening. I would work on this passage in the morning and then it would be illustrated for me. On Wednesday the theme of the chapel service was the peace of God which crosses all barriers. Students from the Philippines, Japan, South Africa, Ghana, Malawi, India and Scotland each talked about the power of the Gospel to break down the barriers that divide us: from the caste system of old India, to tribal customs in Africa which made it very difficult for the woman and man from Malawi to be married, to the South African's experience of apartheid and the Scottish young woman's experience of racial and imperial pride. It was startling to see the manifestations, in life, of what the Biblical writer clearly struggles to put into words: "a plan for the fullness of time to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth...."

The temptation is to keep that safely abstract, to nod in casual agreement with the Biblical rhetoric about the unification of all things and then to go our merry way, perpetuating, enjoying, profiting from, hiding behind, all the barriers that divide and alienate. the temptation is to conclude that what the New Testament means and what faith is about and what God wants of us is something like peace of mind: a private, internal sense of comfort that essentially allows the status quo in the world in spite of the glorious and sometimes revolutionary promises of the Gospel. The temptation is to refuse the difficult task of asking ourselves about the economic and political and social--as well as religious--implications of reconciliation.

The world is broken. The barriers are high. East/West, Rich/Poor, Black/White, Men/Women, Christian/Muslim, Catholic/Protestant. The issue for Christians is whether those barriers are acceptable; whether faith in Jesus Christ, for instance, is compatible with a system of government which, on the basis of race, denies basic humanity and human rights that we have said we believe are ordained of God. That's why the churches are exercised over apartheid. That system institutionalizes a barrier which Christians believe Jesus Christ came to overcome, and has already destroyed. Apartheid is offensive theologically. What that means

harmony, peace. They happen often enough to give hope when we have about given up on the possibility of human beings ever actually living in peace.

On Monday the chapel service at Union Seminary was led by two members of the staff: Kosuke Koyama, a native of Japan, and Robert Handy, recently retired, distinguished professor of American Church History, whose books many of us have long admired. Kosuke Koyama was born in 1933. He was 12 years old when fire bombing destroyed Tokyo. He recalls it vividly. He lived just outside the city and will remember until the day he dies the fire raining from the sky. Robert Handy was a chaplain on an American troop ship, stationed in Japan immediately after the war and in the early months of occupation. Handy recalls the wariness and fear and hatred which the occupying troops--including himself--experienced during the slow Pacific voyage. He recalls the weariness and anguish of troops on the ship on the westward leg of his mission: young soldiers and marines, some of whom had been in combat 500 consecutive days, many of whom had watched buddy after buddy die, and all of whom wanted to know from him, the chaplain, why? He stood in the chapel at Union Seminary in the early weeks of his distinguished emeritus status beside a Japanese man and told us that his faith had been brittle in those days, that he participated in the hatred and fear of the Japanese, and that he had despaired for the human race. He told about visiting Tokyo and witnessing the sight he will never forget--the endless gray of a city devastated as far as the eye could see, where 90,000 had died in one four-hour period. He shared the meaning and how it was a spiritual crisis for him: "What help is there - if civilized nations can do this to each other?"

And then, Professor Handy said, he visited a Buddhist shrine where Japanese families traditionally visited and enjoyed a day together. He was wearing the uniform of an officer in the U. S. Army--the enemy, whom the Japanese had reason to hate and fear. He was leery, a little afraid to encounter Japanese civilians, and how he did that at the shrine, and how they nodded at him, extending wary but genuine respect, and how the people who were the enemy became people and how he experienced the reality of humanity's unity, and how he knew the power of Jesus Christ to overcome high and venerable barriers.

Kosuke Koyama read Scripture next, the incident in Luke where Jesus promises his disciples that if they order a tree to be rooted up and tossed into the sea, it would actually happen.

It was a powerful moment for anyone in the room whose life was touched by the Second World War. It was an equally powerful moment for anyone who ever wondered about the human prospect and the relevance of the Gospel of Jesus Christ...in this time until the Kingdom comes... It was testimony to the hope we celebrate this day as we break the bread and drink the cup of World Communion.

The heart of God has been laid bare, the Apostle wrote. There has been a plan at work throughout eternity. In our time, in God's love, you and I are part of that plan. It is "a plan to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth..."

So let us come to table. Amen.